THE LIMITS OF CONJECTURE: POLITICAL LIBERALISM, COUNTER-RADICALISATION, AND UNREASONABLE RELIGIOUS VIEWS

Abstract

Originally proposed by John Rawls, the idea of reasoning from conjecture is popular among the proponents of political liberalism in normative political theory. Reasoning from conjecture consists in discussing with fellow citizens who are attracted to illiberal and antidemocratic ideas by focusing on their religious or otherwise comprehensive doctrines, attempting to convince them that such doctrines actually call for loyalty to liberal democracy. Our goal is to criticise reasoning from conjecture as a tool aimed at persuasion and, in turn, at improving the stability of liberal democratic institutions. To pursue this goal, we use as case study real-world efforts to counter-radicalise at-risk Muslim citizens, which, at first glance, reasoning from conjecture seems well-placed to contribute to. This case study helps us to argue that the supporters of reasoning from conjecture over-intellectualise opposition to liberal democracy and what societies can do to counter it. Specifically, they (i) underestimate how few members of society can effectively perform reasoning from conjecture; (ii) overlook that the burdens of judgement, a key notion for political liberals, highlight how dim the prospects of reasoning from conjecture are; and (iii) do not pay attention to the causes of religious persons' opposition to liberal democracy. However, not everything is lost for political liberals, provided that they redirect attention to different and under-researched resources contained in Rawls's theory. In closing, we briefly explain how such resources are much better placed than reasoning from conjecture to provide guidance relative to counter-radicalisation in societies (i) populated by persons who do not generally hold anything close to a fully worked out and internally consistent comprehensive doctrine, and (ii) where political institutions should take responsibility for at least part of the existing alienation from liberal democratic values.

Keywords

Reasoning from conjecture; political liberalism; counter-radicalisation; burdens of judgement; Aarhus model; John Rawls; Islamism; pluralism; multiculturalism; disagreement.

The governments of many European countries are currently extremely concerned about radicalisation, that is, 'the rejection of the key dimensions of democratic culture that are at the centre of the European value system' (Rabasa and Benard 2015: 3) Although radicalisation comes in many different forms, since 9/11 and even more so since the rise of ISIS, a lot of attention has been paid specifically to Islamism. Part of the effort to address Islamism has consisted in attempts at counter-radicalisation, aimed at stopping 'members from non-radicalised populations from being radicalised without the use of heavy-handed coercive or repressive measures' (Schmid 2013, 50).

As exemplified by 'Prevent' in the UK, counter-radicalisation programmes are often hugely controversial, and understandably so. Under the Prevent strategy, the employees of public authorities, including school teachers and academics, have a duty to watch out for and report anyone in the process or at risk of being radicalised. As pointed out by many, these sorts of

strategies, which turn counter-radicalisation into surveillance, undermine the already strained relationship of trust between the state and Muslim communities (Thomas 2015).[1]

Within political theory, it seems fair to expect the influential framework of political liberalism, originally proposed by John Rawls, to be able to offer guidance as to how to pursue counter-radicalisation in a less problematic way. Rawlsian political liberalism is centred on the idea that unity and stability are possible in liberal-democratic societies despite ineliminable far-reaching disagreement, religious as well as political, among their members. Moreover, a significant trend within recent political liberal literature is to endorse and pay close attention to so-called reasoning from conjecture, a form of discourse that has much in common with the very task of counter-radicalisation. Indeed, reasoning from conjecture (hereafter 'conjecture', for short) is about discussing with religious citizens who appear to be drawn to ideas that are in tension with liberal democracy, in an attempt to change their mind about them.

Our goal in this paper is to criticise conjecture as proposed by political liberals, using the counter-radicalisation of at-risk Muslim citizens as a case study that illustrates its shortcomings. The counter-radicalisation of Muslim citizens is particularly apt because conjectural reasoning addressed at Muslim interlocutors constitutes the main example in the literature supporting conjecture. This case will help us demonstrate how the literature on conjecture over-intellectualises citizens' detachment from and opposition to liberal democracy, as well as what should be done about them. We aim to argue that these matters should be understood differently, and that Rawlsian political liberalism already contains underappreciated resources to help us move in the right direction.

Our argument, which discusses the radicalisation of Muslim citizens, is particularly important in times when there is a backlash against multiculturalism – a backlash that is analysed, in one way or another, by several contributions to this special issue. Indeed, our analysis stresses even more emphatically than the supporters of conjectural reasoning how religious and cultural pluralism is not the problem that needs to be addressed for the sake of the stability of liberal democracy. As we will point out, radicalisation does not stem from doctrinal beliefs but has social, economic and political roots.

Section 1 presents Rawls's account of political liberalism after explaining why it seems legitimate to expect that it should be able to help us with the task of counter-radicalisation. Next, Section 2 focuses on and reconstructs the burgeoning literature on conjecture. Starting with a contrast between conjecture and a few examples of real-world counter-radicalisation initiatives,

[1] *Prevent* has been heavily criticised from the pages of newspapers like *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, as exemplified by Maynard (2015) and Versi (2017).

Section 3 turns to criticising it. Specifically, we demonstrate that the supporters of conjecture (i) underestimate how few citizens can function as conjecturers; (ii) fail to notice that key notions from within Rawlsian political liberalism, concerning the so-called burdens of judgement, suggest that the prospects of conjecture are dim; and (iii) overlook the root causes of radicalisation. In the concluding section, we hint at alternative and underexplored theoretical resources from Rawls's political liberalism, which are more promising to understand how to address opposition to liberal democracy.

1. Why Political Liberalism?

It seems legitimate to expect that Rawls's model of political liberalism and the work many others have done to further develop it be able to help us think about the counter-radicalisation of at-risk Muslim citizens. This is because one of the defining features of Rawls's political liberalism is the acknowledgment that disagreement, about the good life and religious matters as well as political views, among the friends of liberal democracy but also between them and its critics, is an *ineliminable* fact of liberal democratic life. At the same time, Rawls does not lose faith in the possibility of a degree of social unity and, in turn, of stable and legitimate liberal democracies. Consequently, Rawlsian political liberalism seems uniquely well-placed to provide guidance as to how to counter-radicalise religious views while taking into full consideration the huge difficulty of solving disagreements with views we do not like. Let us then reconstruct Rawls's model.

As we have just mentioned, Rawls believes that to a good extent, the great plurality of views on religious matters, conceptions of the good life, philosophical questions and other so-called comprehensive issues existing in our societies is simply the product of the exercise of human reason. Human judgement is burdened and, therefore, even the best effort to solve complicated issues will always be hindered. Even well-intentioned, well-informed and intelligent persons are bound to keep disagreeing about religious or otherwise comprehensive matters, locked in what Rawls calls 'reasonable pluralism' (Rawls 1996: 54–58).

At first glance, the fact of reasonable pluralism seems fatal to the legitimacy and stability of liberal democratic institutions. If, as Rawls believes, legitimacy is given by wide justifiability in society, how can any single framework of institutions ever pass the test and be justifiable across the mutually incompatible comprehensive doctrines populating reasonable pluralism? Similarly, it seems impossible that citizens endorsing comprehensive doctrines that are very different from one another can all find appropriate reasons to accept the same institutional framework. Appropriate reasons are not just 'modus vivendi' reasons, requiring citizens to obey a set of institutions for the time being, until their faction musters enough power to impose their sectarian view on the rest of

society. According to Rawls, 'stability for the right reasons' is necessary for any political arrangement to be truly stable (Rawls 1996: 391–92).

Rawls rescues the possibility of a legitimate and stable liberal democratic order by pointing out that the political conception behind such order can work like a module, capable of fitting into the most diverse comprehensive doctrines, which can then form an 'overlapping consensus' over it. This political conception reaches no deeper than basic political ideas of (i) society as fair system of cooperation for everyone's mutual advantage and (ii) persons as free and equal members of such cooperative system. Also, it only includes general liberal commitments, which can then be specified in different ways by different citizens – equal basic liberties, equal opportunities, the acknowledgement of a special priority for liberties and opportunities as well as the provision of all-purpose means to make them effective for everyone (Rawls 1997: 774). According to Rawls, when political power is exercised, especially if the issue at hand concerns constitutional essentials and issues of basic justice, decision-makers have a duty of civility to advance at least one 'public reason' in support of their decision – which is to say, to ground it in the agreed-upon political conception, making the resulting law or policy widely justifiable and therefore legitimate (Rawls 1996: 212–54). A legitimate liberal democratic order is stable if enough members of society accept the political conception.

Now, Rawls explains that although the political conception behind the liberal democratic order can fit into very different comprehensive doctrines, it is only acceptable to so-called reasonable persons, defined by two features. First, reasonable persons want the terms of cooperation to be fair to every person, conceived of as free and equal, not just to the groups they belong to. Second, they accept the burdens of judgement and are therefore unwilling to impose their own comprehensive doctrines on others through the coercive power of the state (Rawls 1996: 48–58).

The spread of reasonableness is crucial for the stability of liberal democratic institutions. However, Rawls notes that regardless of how well-established liberal democratic institutions are, unreasonable persons will always be present. Especially when they threaten to become too numerous, the rest of society is therefore left with the task 'to contain them so that they do not undermine the unity and justice of society' (Rawls 1996: xix).

This task should capture the attention of anyone interested in the counter-radicalisation of at-risk Muslim citizens. Indeed, the task of counter-radicalising religious persons who are being radicalised into opposition to the basic tenets of liberal democracy appears to fall neatly under the umbrella of the containment of unreasonable views. Then, what do Rawls and other political liberals suggest regarding how to go about containing unreasonable beliefs? Very surprisingly,

Rawls never looks at what containment should look like, and this topic has received very little focused attention by political liberals more in general.[2]

Still, political liberals have recently produced a flurry of literature on conjecture. Conjecture is not explicitly brought to bear on containment by Rawls, but a few theorists who have developed the notion have containment or related notions in mind. Conjecture seems highly relevant not only to containment in general, but also to the specific task of counter-radicalising religious citizens. Indeed, it is centrally about the possibility of discussing other persons' comprehensive doctrine so as to show them that in contrast to what they might think, their doctrine is fully hospitable to reasonable political ideas. Therefore, from now on we will focus on conjecture, using the counter-radicalisation of at-risk Muslim citizens as a case study to highlight the limitations of this popular political liberal notion.

2. Reconstructing Reasoning from Conjecture

The attention recently paid to conjecture takes its lead from Rawls's brief analysis of forms of valuable political discourse that are distinct from the duty of citizens to provide public reasons in support of important political decisions. Conjecture is described by Rawls as follows:

> [W]e argue from what we believe, or conjecture, are other people's basic doctrines, religious or secular, and try to show them that, despite what they might think, they can still endorse a reasonable political conception that can provide a basis for public reasons. […] We must openly explain our intentions and state that we do not assert the premises from which we argue, but that we proceed as we do to clear up what we take to be a misunderstanding on others' part, and perhaps equally on ours (Rawls 1997: 786–787).

To fill the gaps in Rawls's extremely sketchy account of conjecture, several political liberals have gone back to it. Among them, Andrew March deserves a special mention in that he frames a large part of his research as an actual instance of conjecture in Rawls's sense of the term. His focus is on Islam and existing tensions between, on the one hand, the acceptance of the idea of a reasonable liberal democratic order and, on the other hand, certain interpretations of the Qur'an that, for

[2] A notable exception is provided by Jonathan Quong, who calls for the curtailment of unreasonable persons' right to free speech and other basic liberties in crisis situations where they pose a real threat to the stability of the liberal democratic order (Quong 2004: 323–335). However, as argued by Gabriele Badano and Alasia Nuti, given the special value that liberals place on everyone having equal liberties, Quong's 'harsh' containment strategies cannot be the whole story, and should be complemented by 'softer' containment measures to be adopted earlier on the way to a real threat to stability (Badano and Nuti 2018: 153-154).

example, depict the *hijra*, or emigration from any non-Muslim country, as compulsory and indeed affirm that no Muslim can recognise the authority of a non-Muslim state as legitimate.

March's goal is 'to investigate what is involved Islamically in arguing for the religious legitimacy of liberal citizenship in such a way that believers (particularly those open to arguments against liberal citizenship) might be convinced' (March 2009: 13). In pursuing this goal, he examines traditions of Islamic law and of interpretation of the Qur'an more in general, bringing together potentially problematic ideas such as *hijra* and *jihad* with existing liberal interpretations of them and other concepts such as *aman*, or the contractual obligation requiring Muslims to be loyal to the states that provide protection to them. According to March, this conjectural effort leads to the conclusion that the most plausible interpretation of the Muslim tradition is consistent with liberal views of society as a system of cooperation among Muslim and non-Muslim equals.

What is the purpose of this and other conjectural efforts? Rawls remains vague about what conjecture is for. Although other political liberals have explored the purpose of conjecture, some do not draw any link with the task of containing unreasonable views. For example, Alessandro Ferrara believes that conjecture is meant to bolster the legitimacy, not the stability of reasonable liberal democratic institutions; by searching the comprehensive doctrines of unreasonable persons, it aims to identify a foothold for a justification for such institutions that can be directed specifically at them (Ferrara 2014: 71–72). Similarly, Micah Schwartzman is not concerned about instability, but about communitarian objections to political liberalism stressing the high personal costs that accepting reasonableness as governing political decision-making has for religious citizens (Schwartzman 2012: 523).

However, March believes that as long as conjecturers are not only open with their interlocutors, but also sincerely believe in the plausibility of their interpretation of the target doctrine, conjectures constitute an attempt at persuasion 'for the right reasons', aimed at enhancing the stability of liberal democratic institutions (March 2009: 23–33). This finally brings us to the conceptual area of containment, which is explicitly listed by Matthew Clayton and David Stevens (2014: 73–76) as one of the reasons for engaging with unreasonable religious citizens through a discussion of their comprehensive doctrines.

Whatever else conjecture might achieve, containment through persuasion is the purpose we wish to take centre-stage in this paper. The very idea of engaging in conjectural reasoning, trying to show how the belief system of one's interlocutors might be closer than they realise to the basic ideas of liberal democracy, seems inextricably connected to the project of generating a perspectival shift in them – one that will hopefully lead them to self-consciously become loyal to liberal democracy. Moreover, the project of counter-radicalising at-risk Muslim citizens, which is this

paper's case study, is one and the same thing as an attempt to *persuade* them to accept or hold on to the basic commitments of liberal democracy. Therefore, it is the promise and suitability of conjecture to help contain the spread of unreasonable views that we aim to evaluate, and the case of counter-radicalisation will assist us in our analysis.

A final point we wish to make, which is meant to clarify how wide the range of conjectural activities we plan to criticise is, concerns the question of who the conjecturers should be, starting with the issue of how external conjecturers need to be to their interlocutors' system of beliefs. On this issue, several authors push conjecture well beyond Rawls's original account. As we have seen, Rawls stresses that conjecturers do not share the premises from which they argue. This appears to have led some proponents of conjecture to interpret it as something to be constructed from a broad tradition of thought that is not your own, as exemplified by March, who is not a Muslim, conjecturing through his published work that the most plausible interpretation of Islam is hospitable to reasonable liberal democratic ideas.

Still, other supporters of conjecture appear to (explicitly or implicitly) reject such limitations, opening the door to conjecturers belonging to the same broad tradition of faith as their interlocutors (Schwartzman 2012: 528 and fn.) or even sharing the premises of their conjectural arguments.[3] Among them, Clayton and Stevens are particularly keen to argue that conjecturers should be as internal to their interlocutors' belief system as possible.

Although they do not label their account of discursive engagement 'conjecture', Clayton and Stevens quote Rawls's description of conjectural reasoning at length when defining it (Clayton and Stevens 2014: 82), and other commentators have in fact already classed them as proponents of conjecture (Wong forthcoming). They propose that the task to challenge unreasonable religious views should be taken up by 'those who share the same doctrinal beliefs', presumably minus the unreasonable elements (Clayton and Stevens 2014: 82). This is because those who only argue hypothetically risk appearing 'disingenuous' to their audience or, in other words, being perceived as someone who is much more interested in bending to a political end the resources of the target doctrine than offering a plausible interpretation of it (Clayton and Stevens 2014: 80). Consequently, the members of such audience would likely be extremely suspicious, conjectures fall on deaf ears, and persuasion fail.

Clayton and Stevens's proposed account of discursive engagement will then be very different from March's traditional picture of conjectures as advancing, in a hermeneutical way, what

[3] Ferrara discusses as examples of conjecture the attempts made by the Catholic Robert Bellah and the Jew Michael Walzer to build arguments supporting basic liberal democratic political ideas by drawing respectively on the Catholic and the Jewish traditions (Ferrara 2014: 76–81). Nothing in Ferrara's reconstruction leads the reader to believe that either Bellah or Walzer rejects the premises of their arguments.

conjecturers take to be the most plausible interpretation of someone else's religious doctrine. If conjecturers are reasonable members of the same community of faith as the citizens drawn to unreasonable beliefs, conjectures will mostly become an attempt to convince someone that, in Clayton and Stevens's words, they are actually 'mistaken about the gods' and at least some of their 'religious views are mistaken' (Clayton and Stevens 2014: 78 and 79, respectively). As an example, Clayton and Stevens mention Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, an eminent advocate of a reformulation of Islamic Sharia Law that makes Sharia consistent with constitutional democracy. In a nutshell, An-Na'im makes the case that the eternal message of Islam is contained in Muhammad's earlier Mecca teachings, not in the later and more exclusionary Medina teachings, and that present-day conditions are ripe to switch.

Interestingly, Clayton and Stevens's case in support of conjecturers being members of the same community of faith as the citizens they plan to engage interlocks with their argument to the effect that conjecturers must be common citizens, not public officials and not even 'political philosophers'. According to them, no one in public office (or, so it seems, no one arguing for liberal democracy from a high-visibility platform) should explicitly endorse any specific religious or otherwise comprehensive doctrine when performing their roles, or else they risk alienating the reasonable citizens from society at large who do not share it (Clayton and Stevens 2014, 80–81). However, as we have seen, Clayton and Stevens believe that discursive engagement only promises to be persuasive if its targets are reassured that the reasonable persons who have reached out to them are committed to the main tenets of the worldview they are arguing about. Consequently, conjecture should be for common citizens to carry out - a position that contradicts March, who is himself both a conjecturer and a political philosopher, and that has been criticised in an attempt to bring politicians back among possible conjecturers (Wong forthcoming).

Clayton and Stevens's argument in support of conjecturers being internal to their interlocutors' system of religious beliefs has appeal, especially for perspectives, like ours, interested in conjecture because of its promise to contribute to persuading and, therefore, counter-radicalising religious citizens. In what follows, we will criticise conjectural reasoning across the whole spectrum of positions about how external to one's interlocutors' worldview conjecturers need to be (from March's and what seems to be Rawls's original views to Clayton and Stevens's position), and also about who conjecturers should be more in general.

3. Too Much Faith in Conjecture

Although different scholars specify conjecture in different ways, they are united in understanding conjecture as meant to promote a shift in religious persons' views by *doctrinally* engaging them. This

'doctrinal route' is not, however, central to the practices of counter-radicalisation that, in European states, communities and municipalities have implemented to address Islamism – not even to the ones that share with conjecture an important element of engagement and discussion. In this section, we will argue that this gulf between conjecture and real-world practices of counter-radicalisation is symptomatic of the fundamental shortcomings of conjectural reasoning.

3.1. Real-world practices of counter-radicalisation

In recent years, one of the approaches to fight religious radicalisation and 'home-grown jihadists' that has received great attention by the media is the so-called 'Aarhus model' (Henley 2014; Crouch and Henley 2015). The Danish city of Aarhus has developed a holistic approach to counter-radicalisation, which has been significantly successful at preventing young Muslims from radicalising and joining jihadist groups abroad, and even at rehabilitating returning ISIS fighters.[4] The approach is centred on the principle of inclusion and offers participants wide-ranging services, i.e., from counselling to support with healthcare, education, employment and housing. Central to the approach is the 'mentoring programme' in which participants are assigned a trained mentor with whom they can discuss about everything and who can help them 'to find paths of inclusion regarding the activities and tasks in the[ir] daily life' (Bertelsen 2015: 244). Rather than examining, as conjecturers would do, participants' religious beliefs to directly change them, the programme aims to 'transform the[ir] personal, social, cultural and political motivations into modes of participation and citizenship' that Rawlsians would call 'reasonable' (Bertelsen 2015: 243).

In Belgium, the city of Mechelen has endorsed an approach to counter-radicalisation that is similarly centred on social cohesion and has produced impressive results. The municipality has invested in activities that engage all its residents and, especially, the youth. For instance, it encourages residents to volunteer for the municipality and participate in local governance. Also, it organises after-school activities for vulnerable children and teenagers with the aim of tackling isolation and promoting a sense of membership in the city (EUobserver 2016). While Belgium is one of the European countries with most jihadist fighters, the large city of Mechelen has registered no cases of individuals fleeing the country to fight abroad (EUobserver 2016).

In the UK, Muslim communities and activists have tended to lead counter-radicalisation initiatives without the support of institutions because of the widespread feeling of resentment and distrust towards the governmental counter-terrorism agenda promoted by Prevent. For example, the community group 'Engage', which is based in Dewsbury, West Yorkshire, runs a programme

[4] Technically, the 'Aarhus model' represents an approach not only to counter-radicalisation, but also to so-called de-radicalisation. De-radicalisation programmes deal with suspected or convicted terrorists and with persons who otherwise plan to resort to violence (Schmid 2013: 50).

aimed at young Muslims who either are at risk of radicalisation or are radicalised. Although participants are exposed to interpretations of Islam compatible with liberal democratic values, they are also involved in many other activities, which have nothing to do with their religious beliefs, such as going on trips and excursions, preparing meals, playing in football tournaments, being mentored and helped with CV writing.[5]

Often grassroots activities do not touch on religious views at all. An interesting example is the initiative led by Jahan Mahmood – a military historian researcher based in Birmingham. Mahmood organises workshops and screenings to interact with members of Muslim communities and explain the contribution of Muslim people to British military campaigns over history (Shabi 2016). In stressing how, for instance, Punjabi Muslims formed the largest component of the British army outside of the UK during World Wars I and II, Mahmood's talks aim to reconcile participants' religious identity with their citizenship. They intend to provide a powerful counter-narrative to right-wing populist and Islamist discourses that, in different ways, frame Muslim identity as irreconcilable with loyalty to the British state.

These examples show that although practices of counter-radicalisation within Muslim communities and local municipalities involve, like conjecture, engagement and discussion, they sharply differ from it in that they are not centred around doctrinal engagement. Either doctrinal discussions constitute one of many components of counter-radicalisation programmes or they are not even part of the process. Although initially puzzling, this gulf separating conjecture from real-world counter-radicalisation will not come as a surprise any more once conjecture is closely scrutinised. Indeed, as we will show, not only is conjecture extremely difficult to perform successfully but it is also oblivious to the complex causes of religious radicalisation.

3.2. Who can be a conjecturer?

As seen in Section 2, the proponents of conjecture already debate the question of who conjecturers should be. When conjecture is performed for the sake of stability, the most urgent problem to consider is that not everyone can be a persuasive conjecturer – a problem that, as we aim to demonstrate, is underappreciated in the literature. Conjecturers should be able to persuasively justify a reasonable political conception by drawing on the resources offered by the religious doctrine that is endorsed by their audience. Who can plausibly hope to succeed at that?

Conjecturers cannot simply have some vague knowledge of the religious comprehensive doctrine they are conjecturing about; they should have a considerable expertise in it (Schwartzman

[5] For a description of Engage, see http://muslimview.co.uk/news/dewsbury-muslims-launch-independent-counter-extremism-project/.

2012: 521). In the case of Islam, they need to have gained quite a deep knowledge of the text of Qur'an, its various interpretations over time, the historical development of Muslim ethical and cultural traditions, and the different sources of Islamic jurisprudence. Otherwise, their conjectural attempt is doomed to fail (or, better, it could not even start for lack of its building blocks).

This necessary *desideratum* of religious expertise rules out politicians as plausible conjecturers. Indeed, we do not usually expect our political elite to be so well-versed in religious doctrines. Moreover, it does not seem reasonable to require them to become such experts, considering the many other important responsibilities that politicians should fulfil.

Ordinary citizens are also unsuitable candidates. Indeed, there are not many persons who are so knowledgeable about religious systems of beliefs as to be able to seriously attempt to argue that, contrary to what some of its followers think, a religious doctrine contains the necessary resources to support a reasonable political conception. This consideration applies both to ordinary citizens who do not belong to the same broad religious tradition as their audience and to those who, instead, are Muslim. As Schwartzman recognises, many religious communities, including Islam, simply 'delegate the responsibility of answering ethical and political questions to specific authorities', such as imams (Schwartzman 2012: 540). The adherents of a religious doctrine do not generally have a deep knowledge of, say, the central texts of their own religion, let alone an understanding of the vast corpus of commentaries developed over time.

The only apt conjecturers seem to be those who have devoted a considerable amount of their time to the study of the particular religious doctrine they intend to conjecture about: (a) scholars who may or may not belong to Islam, like An-Na'im and March; and (b) reasonable leaders of religious communities, such as Ajmal Masroor, a Bangladeshi-born British imam who has repeatedly spoken out against Islamism in the media and while leading his Friday prayers in London.

However, apt conjecturers should not just be religious expert; they should also have a more specific knowledge of exactly what elements of their audience's belief system drive them not to endorse reasonable liberal democratic institutions. Indeed, assuming for now that radicalisation has doctrinal roots, it is likely that different Muslim citizens who reject basic reasonable political ideas do so for different doctrinal reasons. For some, the reason may be their interpretation of the inner logic of this or that specific religious precept (e.g., *jihad*, *hijira*, or other concepts); others, instead, may not prioritise liberal democratic political ideas in case of conflict with religious beliefs because of how they understand their religion's instructions regarding similar conflict situations.

In this sense, conjecture is like rhetoric in that it needs to be tailored to a very specific audience. Conjecturers should develop their arguments by paying close attention to the particular

ways in which some religious citizens see an inconsistency between their religious doctrine and any reasonable political conception. Like rhetoric, conjecture requires that those who carry it out 'acknowledge the particular features of individuals',[6] i.e., the distinctive ways in which they think religiously, interpreting and valuing different doctrinal ideas. Now, although scholars master the complexity of Islam, they do not generally have access to the more individualised knowledge that seems important to make conjecture persuasive for specific citizens who might be attracted to Islamist views. They are unlike local imams, who frequently interact with the members of their communities and, therefore, tend to be better placed to formulate conjectural arguments that are as tailored as possible to the specific religious beliefs and ways of thinking of community members.

In sum, after the mechanics of conjecture are closely examined, it seems that only the leaders of religious communities, i.e., imams, are well-placed to be apt conjecturers. However, even when conjecture is carried out by apt conjecturers, political liberals should recognise that its prospects of success are very limited. Indeed, as we will see, the acknowledgment of the burdens of judgment provides resources internal to political liberalism to be deeply sceptical about conjecture.

3.3 Conjecture and the Burdens of Judgement

The theory behind the burdens of judgement, which we presented in Section 1 as one of the defining features of political liberalism, encapsulates a powerful idea that many develop through their own personal experience: even if all persons engaged in discussion are intelligent, well-informed and well-intentioned, it is still likely that they will end up disagreeing about complex topics. This is because many factors burden our judgement, including the vagueness of concepts; the complexity of the evidence bearing on numerous issues; the fact that different considerations often hold on both sides of an issue; and the extent to which the way we interpret concepts, assess evidence and weigh conflicting considerations is shaped by our total experience.

The burdens of judgement affect discussions carried out at all levels (including discussions remaining strictly within the limits of the political domain, never invoking any religious or otherwise comprehensive belief as deep fundations for one's political convictions). However, they are likely to create greater divisions the farther from the political domain an argument for political conclusions starts. Here we do not need to contend, contentiously, that debates over, say, religious issues (e.g., whether Muslims should believe that in the *Yawm ad-Dīn* – the 'Day of Judgement' – their resurrected bodies will be the same as the ones they had on earth) are in themselves more affected by the burdens of judgements and thus more conducive to divisions than discussions about political issues (e.g., the priority of liberty over the fair redistribution of wealth). Likewise,

[6] Garsten (2006: 198).

making the same point in the context of hermeneutical arguments, we do not need to suggest that the burderns of judgement apply with greater force to (a) the analysis of whether the most plausible interpretation of Islamic texts and commentaries supports a belief in the resurrection of earthly bodies than to (b) an investigation into whether the priority of liberty follows from the most plausible interpretation of a certain tradition of liberal political wiritings.

What we want to highlight is that conjecture requires conjecturers to, first, start by making contentious points about religious problems (as in Clayton and Stevens's 'you-are-mistaken-about-the-gods' view of engagement) or, at least, about religious doctrines (as in March's attempt to establish as the most plausible a certain interpretation of Islamic sources among several others on offer), in order then to build consensus at the level of a reasonable political conception. This multiple-step structure is integral to conjecture, which, by definition, cannot work on the assumption that its audience already see consistency between their religious doctrine and the reasonable political ideas that provide the basis for public reason; conjecture works precisely by showing that that, if its audience came to think about their religious doctrine under a new light, or even made a few changes to their system of religious beliefs, they would then realise that a reasonable political conception can be justified from within their religious doctrine.

The problem with this is that multiplying the argumentative steps that need to be taken also multiplies the opportunities for the burdens of judgement to interfere with the reasoning process because the argument advanced by the conjecturer will have to deal with vague concepts, complex evidence and conflicting considerations at each stage. Due to the cumulative effects of the burdens of judgement, the expectation that we can persuade our interlocutors of the value of our reasonable political conclusions—for example, of a belief in freedom of expression or even in a reasonable general political conception of society as a fair cooperative system—becomes particularly unrealistic.

In sum, the cumulative effects that the burdens of judgement have on conjecture should lead us to recognise that it is extremely unlikely that (even apt) conjecturers would be able to convince their interlocutors to endorse a reasonable political conception. To reiterate, this conclusion applies across all models of conjecture - to the one starting with arguments suggesting to their audience that some of their religious beliefs are mistaken, and to the one starting with arguments suggesting that the most plausible interpretation of the audience's religious tradition actually supports basic liberal democratic political ideas.[7]

[7] Note that Schwartzman mentions that reasoning from conjecture is always uncertain, and its speculative nature is in part the result of 'differences in judgement' (2012: 529). However, he does not explore what this means for persuasion and containment.

Here it is worth noting that the burdens of judgement, which are usually invoked to explain reasonable pluralism, have turned out to be useful also to understand the persistence of at least certain kinds of unreasonable disagreement. They clarify why political liberals should be particularly sceptical about the prospects of conjecture and should explore, instead, whether there are other resources in political liberalism to engage religious citizens drawn to unreasonable ideas.

3.4. Religion and the causes of religious radicalisation

We have seen that carrying out conjecture persuasively is much more complex than its supporters recognise. The gulf between conjecture and real-world counter-radicalisation practices should not be surprising also for another reason, concerning the causes of religious radicalisation, which we now turn to discuss. In recent years, a vast sociological literature has emerged that examines why citizens of broadly liberal democratic countries come to embrace (or be attracted to) extremist religious views. Such a literature, which particularly focuses on the causes of 'home-grown' Islamism, identifies different factors that drive persons to religious radicalisation. Although scholars disagree on the weight of specific factors, they tend to concur in pointing out that religion, including the endorsement of doctrinal beliefs and the interpretation of doctrinal texts, does not play a major role in religious radicalisation. To be sure, religion often offers a narrative through which non-religious grievances can be framed. However, it is not one of the main driving forces behind radicalisation (Abbas and Siddique 2012: 120; Aly and Striegher 2012; Hafez and Mullins 2015: 966; Perlinger and Milton 2016).

Scholars argue that the roots of religious radicalisation are social, economic and political. For instance, some stress the importance of social and economic disenfranchisement in nourishing the grievances that some Muslim citizens experience towards their countries, putting them at risk of radicalisation (e.g., Bakker and Bont 2016; Hafez and Mullins 2015; Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol 2014). In European states, Muslim citizens – especially second and third generations of migrants – are overrepresented in the lower socio-economic groups of the population and among the unemployed. As shown by a recent report on social mobility in the UK, young Muslims face enormous barriers in school and in higher education, while seeking employment and at their workplace, which seriously undermine their potential to be upwardly socially mobile (Stevenson et al. 2017).

The frustration about social and economic status is also compounded by experiences of ethnic discrimination, physical and verbal attacks, and humiliation. As observed by some scholars, the reality and perception of living in countries that are increasingly hostile to Muslim identities and in which xenophobic sentiments are fuelled by right-wing populist parties and part of the

media crucially contribute to persons feeling that they do not belong there. In turn, this may drive them towards radicalisation (e.g., Abbas and Siddique 2012; Hafez and Mullins 2015; Weggemans, Bakker, and Grol 2014). As we saw in Section 3.1, it is feelings of belonging and attachment that some activist and community-based practices of counter-radicalisation, such as Mahmood's talks about British military history, try to reignite by providing narratives that emphasise the social, cultural and economic contribution of Muslims to their European countries.

Relatedly, scholars also include social networks among the factors leading to radicalisation. Feeling alienated from society and isolated within their community, those at risk of radicalisation find opportunities to voice their frustration and build ties of solidarity by joining pre-existing radicalised networks (Hafez and Mullins 2015: 964–66). As explained earlier, preventing and tackling isolation through the provision of alternative avenues for socialisation are among the main goals of the wide-ranging set of activities organised in municipalities like Aarhus and Mechelen and by grassroots associations like Engage.

To sum up, as Olivier Roy contends, even in the case of those who eventually resort to violence, radicalisation is not about 'the radicalisation of Islam' but about 'the Islamisation of radicalisation' (Roy 2017: 42). Persons 'do not become radicals because they have misread the texts' (Roy 2017: 42). Indeed, as observed by others, the very use of the expression 'religious radicalism' may be misleading as it suggests that religion is somehow at the root of the problem (e.g., Abbas and Siddique: 125; Kundnani 2015). In this sense, although the political liberal literature on conjecture is ultimately driven by the belief that Islamic texts are compatible with loyalty to a liberal democratic state, it still endorses a 'theological approach to radicalisation', which conceives of radicalisation as 'a product of how Islam is interpreted' and has been proved to be flawed (Kundnani 2015: 16). By reducing radicalisation to individuals' doctrinal mistakes or confusion, the proponents of conjecture miscomprehend the roots of religious radicalisation, thereby neglecting the actual political, social and economic causes of the phenomenon.

4. Concluding Remarks, or, why a Different Political Liberalism is Possible

The main goal of this paper has been to critically evaluate conjecture, a popular concept among political liberals, as a tool of persuasion that can help put the stability of liberal democratic institutions on firmer ground. Our critical analysis has found conjecture to be flawed because over-intellectualistic – (1) in exaggerating the role that citizens can plausibly play in persuasively challenging or otherwise discussing religious doctrines; (2) in losing sight of a key political liberal lesson about how difficult it is to create unity on the basis of doctrinal discussions; and (3) in assuming that religious persons' opposition to liberal democracy has doctrinal roots.

In conclusion, we wish to briefly note how the initial expectation that Rawlsian political liberalism would be able to help us think about counter-radicalisation was not entirely misplaced. Conjecture has turned out to be flawed, but Rawls's political liberalism contains alternative and underexplored resources that, if they received the attention they deserve, could provide much better guidance regarding counter-radicalisation and the fight against extreme views more in general.

When Rawls discusses what could provide an appropriate basis of the motivation to accept liberal democratic institutions, his focus is on the idea of a desire to act in a way appropriate to the kind of person citizens wish to become or, more specifically, a 'desire to act in ways worthy of a reasonable and equal citizen' (Rawls 1996: 85). This acknowledgement of the importance, when it comes to motivation, of the image we have of the sort of person we wish to be comes with the further acknowledgment that our desire to be *recognised by others* as that sort of person is also crucial; when describing the citizens populating stable liberal democracies, Rawls explains that 'not only are they normal and fully cooperating members of society, but they further want to be, and to be recognized as, such members' (Rawls 1996: 81). This amounts to a recognition of the fundamental importance of a sense of identity, which has come up a few times in our discussion of the causes of radicalisation and promising initiatives to counter it.

Rawls's interesting insight allows us to reframe many of the questions we have asked about counter-radicalisation and containment. We can now ask, how can societies try to ensure, consistently with the basic values of political liberalism, that citizens will want to be (and be recognised as) the right sorts of persons or, in other words, will develop the right sense of identity? Rawls briefly considers this question, mentioning the role 'as educator' that public reason can play when it governs law- and policy-making. When the basic structure of society is *really* shaped by political decisions serving liberal democratic values like equal liberties for all, equality of opportunity and the like, and when justifications are publicly offered for such decisions, grounding them in an ideal of society where citizens *really* are treated as free and equal, this system will 'realize a social world within which the ideal of citizenship can be learned and may elicit an effective desire to be that kind of person' (Rawls 1996: 71). An obvious corollary is that we surely cannot expect anyone to develop a sense of identity as reasonable and equal citizens as long as their society systematically disenfranchise and leave them behind, as described in Section 3.4 with regard to Muslims.[8]

[8] It is worth highlighting how Rawls's insight into how citizens can develop the right sense of identity suggests that we should *structurally* reform our society so as to guarantee that citizens are really treated as free and equal. The suggestion is not simply that we should ensure that citizens are offered public justifications, grounded on ideals of society as a fair system of cooperation between free and equal persons, for the political decisions that happen to be debated at present while leaving entrenched injustices in place.

Another interesting place where Rawls appears to steer clear of over-intellectualism is his analysis of the forces that might create and then consolidate over time a following for reasonableness. There he very explicitly states that 'allegiance to a principle of [reasonable] political justice' does not generally 'depend on the knowledge of or the belief in its derivation from a comprehensive view' (Rawls 1996: 159-160). He even claims that most citizens hold 'partially comprehensive' doctrines, which comprise only some, but not nearly all, beliefs concerning the most important religious, philosophical and moral questions, and which provide at most a loose articulation of such beliefs. The prevalence of partially comprehensive doctrines, which is in line with the sociological literature on radicalisation we have discussed earlier, is extremely important. Such doctrines leave the room, within citizens' mindsets, for political liberal democratic ideas to take root due to their appearing reasonable in themselves. Among other things, this means that when liberal democratic principles start being applied *in practice*, 'it is possible for citizens first to appreciate the good those principles accomplish both for themselves and those they care for, as well as for society at large, and then to affirm them on this basis' (Rawls 1996: 160).

Although, in that passage, Rawls seems mainly to refer to formal institutions and the example they set when they are well-ordered, it is possible to interpret the relevant forms of political practice much more broadly. For instance, take actual persons from a religious (e.g. Muslim) community who endorse liberal democratic values and, embodying a Muslim identity, can show in practice that such identity is perfectly compatible with an allegiance to liberal democratic institutions and with a happy life under those institutions. They can play a pivotal role in inspiring others who, instead, may doubt that Islam and liberal democracy are practically compatible in this way. Positive role models do not simply include very prominent figures (e.g., Sadiq Khan, the first Muslim mayor of London), although the symbolic value that high-profile role models have, especially for young persons, should not be underestimated (Khalaf 2016; Saeed 2018: 51). Indeed, the importance of having positive role models is directly incorporated into the practices of counter-radicalisation that we have discussed, which include mentoring efforts, as illustrated by the programme implemented by the Danish city of Aarhus. In addition to offering information and support for participants, mentors can become persons to look up to and being inspired by. More generally, leaders who are held in high esteem within a community and are committed to liberal democratic values can provide a concrete and attainable role model of citizenship and social inclusion that other community members can relate to and be motivated to imitate.

Although discussed in a non-exhaustive manner, these resources Rawls has to offer already open at least three promising directions for future research. First, discursive engagement will have to be rethought as the engagement of persons who normally hold partially comprehensive

doctrines, taking little interest in the connections between their political commitments and religious or other comprehensive views. How can we conduct this sort of engagement ethically, consistently with autonomy and the other values of political liberalism?[9] Second, to be plausible, any account of discursive engagement aimed at improving the stability of liberal democratic institutions should be coupled with a normative theory of the responsibilities of political institutions not only in directly creating fair terms of social cooperation, but also in shaping those terms so that citizens can develop the right motivation to accept them, and reasonableness can spread in society. Third, we should examine the different ways in which liberal democratic ideas can be appreciated in themselves, in practice, beyond the formal forums of public reason and within society at large. For example, we should analyse the importance of having role-models embodying the compatibility between a specific cultural and religious identity, a commitment to liberal democratic values and a fulfilled life under liberal democratic arrangements. If political liberals prioritise these research areas more than conjecture, chances are they will finally be able to provide valuable guidance regarding counter-radicalisation and containment more in general.

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[9] Badano and Nuti (2018) conduct an initial exploration of this question.

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